Osama bin Laden

In the camp, generators were rumbling.
The smell of gasoline was thick in the air.
Rick Bennett was agitated because bin Laden's people had taken his camera days before, and it didn't look as though he was going to get it back.
Now they wanted to give him another camera.
A Panasonic home-video camera.
Bennett had not come halfway around the world to shoot a home video.
He wanted his $65,000 television camera back, and he wanted it back now!
Just then, the gunfire erupted.

Bin Laden's convoy arrived.

Now the show that was being staged for us was in full tilt, and we had no camera with which to record it.
Bin Laden's cameraman handed Bennett the Panasonic. Bennett started taping. That's when the kid started shooting in my ear.
Then he ran alongside Bennett and was firing within an inch of his ear, too, as he walked backward with this crappy camera, taping bin Laden's arrival.

Into the din of gunfire, he walked quickly, surrounded by seven bodyguards.
Each had an AK-47.
Their eyes darted in every direction for any attacker.
This was either merely theatrical or entirely pointless, because with hundreds of rounds being fired into the air, it would have been impossible to pinpoint an assassin.
Take your pick.

At bin Laden's side was his military commander, Muhammad Atef.

Behind him, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Islamic Jihad, an Egyptian group that has merged with bin Laden's growing army.
Bin Laden, with his simple white turban and long black beard, stood six three and was the tallest man in the group.
Despite the chaos of the scene, his eyes were calm, fixed, and steady.
He walked by me and ducked his head to step into a rectangular hut that had been set up for our meeting.
One of his aides waved off the gunfire the way an emcee might quell a standing ovation.

Everyone kept shooting.
Somewhere, all these bullets were falling back down to the earth.

Osama bin Laden had made his entrance.

After his security detail crowded in behind him, I followed into the hut.
Aside from his height, the first thing that struck me about bin Laden was his voice: It was soft and slightly high, with a raspy quality that gave it the texture and sound of an old uncle giving good advice.
Bin Laden settled onto a bench covered with red cushions at the head of the long, rectangular room with clay walls painted white.
Sitting down, he propped his own gun against the wall behind him.
Twenty of his gunmen lined the benches on either side of the long room, leaning in, straining to hear whatever he might say.
Bin Laden's clothes told the story of his entangled themes. He wore a green army field jacket with no insignia.
Draped over the jacket was a gold shawl, and under the army jacket was the traditional Muslim clothing that made him look like me.

Osama bin Laden has a firm handshake.
We exchanged pleasantries in the polite but stilted manner one uses when speaking through a translator.
His aides had insisted the day before that I give them a list of my questions in writing.
As bin Laden was getting settled, one of them said to me, "I have very good news. Mr. bin Laden will answer each of your questions."
Then he added that bin Laden's answers would not be translated on the spot. "You can take the tape to New York and have them translate it there."

"If the answers are not translated now, how can I ask follow-up questions?" I asked bin Laden's man.

"Oh, that will not be a problem," he told me. "There will be no follow-up questions."
At this point, Rick, using stronger terms than one might want to with alleged terrorists, demanded his camera back. Suddenly, all his equipment reappeared.

Looking to break the ice, I said to the translator, "Tell Mr. bin Laden that for a guy who comes from a family known for building roads, he could sure use a better driveway up this mountain."

Okay, so admittedly it wasn't much of a joke, but bin Laden's interpreter appeared stricken.

"No, no, no," I said, "don't translate, never mind," waving off the remark.
"It's okay," I said, trying to prevent an international incident.

Not funny.
Sorry.
Jesus.

There was another problem.

As I continued my lame attempts at small talk, flies kept landing on bin Laden's face and white turban.
Sensing that this was undercutting their leader's dignity, his aides asked bin Laden and the gunmen in the room to step outside so that they might spray.
A few minutes later, in a cloud of insecticide, we began.
Osama bin Muhammad bin Awad bin Laden was born forty-one years ago in Saudi Arabia, one of twenty sons of wealthy construction magnate Muhammad bin Laden.

The kingdom's Bin Laden Group is a $ 5 billion concern.

The family's close ties to the Saudi royal family made it easy to get huge government contracts to build roads through the cities and deserts.
It is likely that Osama bin Laden would have gone to school, settled in London, and focused on living comfortably--if history hadn't intervened.

On December 25, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.
Bin Laden, then twenty-two, left for the fighting immediately. When he arrived, he wasted no time.

Spending his money, he financed the recruitment, transportation, and arming of thousands of Palestinians, Tunisians, Somalians, Egyptians, Saudis, and Pakistanis to fight the Russians.

Bin Laden brought in his own bulldozers and dump trucks.
Grizzled mujahideen fighters still tell of the young man who rode the bulldozers himself, digging trenches on the front lines.
The men who follow bin Laden have all heard the stories, and they pass them on to the younger men.
By his own account, he was in the thick of the action.
He says he got the rifle he carries now in hand-to-hand combat.
"We went through vicious battles with the Russians," bin Laden told me.
"The Russians are known for their brutality.
They used poison gases against us.
I was subjected to this.
We lost many fighters.
But we were able to deter many commando attacks, unlike anything before."

I asked him why a man of wealth, from a powerful family, had gone to

Afghanistan to live in trenches and fight the Russian invaders on the front lines.

"It is hard for one to understand if the person does not understand Islam," he said, patiently explaining his interpretation of Islam for a citizen of his sworn enemy.

"During the days of jihad, thousands of young men who were well-off financially left the Arabian Peninsula and other areas and joined the fighting.
Hundreds of them were killed in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya."
Of course, by the time of our meeting, the enemy had shifted.
The Soviet Union no longer existed.
The enemy was us. And when I asked bin Laden if he was worried about being captured in an American raid, he quickly dismissed the possibility, turning instead to the reasons he hates the United States.

"The American imposes himself on everyone. Americans accuse our children in Palestine of being terrorists--those children, who have no weapons and have not even reached maturity.
At the same time, Americans defend a country, the state of the Jews, that has a policy to destroy the future of these children.

"We are sure of our victory against the Americans and the Jews as promised by the Prophet: Judgment day shall not come until the Muslim fights the Jew, where the Jew will hide behind trees and stones, and the tree and the stone will speak and say, 'Muslim, behind me is a Jew. Come and kill him.'"

Bin Laden never raises his voice, and to listen to his untranslated answers, one could imagine that he was talking about something that did not much concern him.
Nonchalant.
He does not smile.

He continued, looking down at his hands as if he were reading invisible notes.
"Your situation with Muslims in Palestine is shameful--if there is any shame left in America.
Houses were demolished over the heads of children.
Also, by the testimony of relief workers in Iraq, the American-led sanctions resulted in the death of more than one million Iraqi children.
All of this is done in the name of American interests. We believe that the biggest thieves in the world and the terrorists are the Americans.
The only way for us to fend off these assaults is to use similar means.

We do not worry about American opinion or the fact that

they place prices on our heads.
We as Muslims believe our fate is set."

His interview technique was formidable.
Aside from the advantage of not allowing for simultaneous translation, bin Laden's approach to questions could have been taught by an American public-relations adviser:

First, get out your message.
Then, if you like, answer the question.

Bin Laden believes that the United States, which was so heavily involved in supporting the Afghan rebels, misses the profound point of that exercise: Through sheer will, even superpowers can be defeated.

"There is a lesson to learn from this for he who wishes to learn," he said. "The Soviet Union entered Afghanistan in the last week of 1979, and with Allah's help their flag was folded a few years later and thrown in the trash, and there was nothing left to call the Soviet Union."
The war changed bin Laden.
"It cleared from Muslim minds the myth of superpowers," he said.
He was blooded, a hero among militant Muslims, with perhaps three thousand men waiting to follow him.
But follow him where, into what battle? Many of these men had not been home for years.
By then, fighting was all some of them knew.

And there were huge stockpiles of weapons and grenades and rocket launchers, many of them bought for the mujahideen rebels by the CIA.

In December 1992, bin Laden found the battle he'd been waiting for.

The United States was leading a UN-sanctioned rescue mission into Somalia.

In the midst of a famine, the country's government had completely broken down, and warring tribes-largely Muslim--had cut off relief efforts by humanitarian groups.
Somalians were starving to death in cities and villages, and the U. S., which had moved quickly to rescue oil-rich Kuwait, had come under mounting criticism for doing nothing.

When the Marines landed in the last days of 1992, bin Laden sent in his own soldiers, armed with AK-47's and rocket launchers.
Soon, using the techniques they had perfected against the Russians, they were shooting down American helicopters.

The gruesome pictures of the body of a young army ranger being dragged naked through the streets by cheering crowds flashed around the world.
The yearlong American rescue mission for starving Somalians went from humanitarian effort to quagmire in just three weeks.
Another superpower humiliated.

Another bin Laden victory.

"After leaving Afghanistan, the Muslim fighters headed for Somalia and prepared for a long battle, thinking that the Americans were like the Russians," bin Laden said.
"The youth were surprised at the low morale of the American soldiers and realized more than before that the American soldier was a paper tiger and after a few blows ran in defeat.
And America forgot all the hoopla and media propaganda ... about being the world leader and the leader of the New World Order, and after a few blows they forgot about this title and left, dragging their corpses and their shameful defeat."

I asked bin Laden why he would kill American soldiers whose work was to restore order and allow for the distribution of food.

"Why should we believe that was the true reason America was there?" he replied.

"Everywhere else they went where Muslims lived, all they did was kill children and occupy Muslim land."

During the two days I had waited at the camp for bin Laden, some of his fighters sat on the floor of our hut and told war stories.
One soldier, with a big grin, told of slitting the throats of three American soldiers in Somalia.

When I asked bin Laden about this, he said, "When this took place, I was in the Sudan, but this great defeat pleased me very much, the way it pleases all Muslims."
The Somalia operation, in some ways, made bin Laden.
During the Afghan war, the CIA had been very aware of him (although the agency now insists it never "controlled" him), but in Somalia, bin Laden had taken a swing at the biggest kid in the school yard and given him a black eye.
The next fight, a few weeks later, would begin with a sucker punch.
It was snowing in New York on February 26, 1993, when a massive truck bomb exploded at the World Trade Center, tearing through three levels of the building's underground garage, basement, and foundation.
At the time, I was a reporter for NBC.
As I walked through the scene, I saw a cop I knew from an antiterrorist unit.

Initial reports were that it had been a gas explosion or a transformer that blew up.

"They're not saying this now," he warned, "but this was a bomb.

Too big to be a car, probably a truck on the lower level of the garage. There just isn't anything down there that could blow up and make a hole this big."

Six people were killed, and more than a thousand were injured.

It was the first major international terrorist attack on U. S. soil.

Within weeks, the FBI had tracked down four of the bombers, a collection of militant Muslims, most of whom had fought in Afghanistan and had become followers of a blind sheik in Jersey City named Omar Abdel Rahman.
The organizer of the bombing plot, Ramzi Yousef, boarded a plane at Kennedy airport a few hours after the explosion and escaped.

In New York, the FBI had been given two mandates: Find the rest of the bombers, and find out whom they are working for.
The agents began the tedious job of tracing bank accounts that Yousef had been using to buy the components of the huge bomb.
The money trail led from a Jersey City bank where Yousef had used an ATM card to Detroit to London to Pakistan and finally to Afghanistan.

FBI agents and New York detectives on the Joint Terrorist Task Force debated: Was it the Iranians? The Iraqis? The Libyans?

The consensus among the detectives was that Ramzi Yousef was an intelligence operative working for some hostile foreign power.
But instead, investigators have since uncovered a series of connections between Yousef and groups funded by an individual, Osama bin Laden.
But bin Laden denied to me that he was behind the bombing and claimed he didn't know Ramzi Yousef.
"Unfortunately," he said with a wave of his hand, "I did not know him before the incident."
Next, Ramzi Yousef was seen in Manila with another of bin Laden's associates, Afghan war hero Wali Khan Amin Shah.
They were busy planning to blow up a dozen American jetliners over the Pacific.

Once again, Yousef had no job but seemed to have plenty of money to finance his plans.
The FBI finally caught up to him on February 7, 1995, in Pakistan.

He was living in a very pleasant guesthouse called the Su Casa house in Islamabad.
It was one of the many guesthouses that bin Laden had set up to quarter his fighters.

Government sources say that Khan is now cooperating with the FBI.

The sources tell me that Khan had been very busy moving around the world, setting various bin Laden plans into motion.
He told the agents he went to mail drops and fax machines to receive coded instructions from bin Laden's bases in the Sudan and Afghanistan and that he was in Manila to set up training camps for terrorists when he was ordered to survey the routes that President Clinton would be using during an official state visit to the Philippines.

Last winter, Khan, wearing a bright-orange jumpsuit, sat in a closed room in the Metropolitan Correctional Center in lower Manhattan, patiently explaining to the feds that the mercury found in his apartment in Manila was not for bomb making but was rather to be placed inside the bullets that would be used to shoot President Clinton.
"That way," Khan said, "if the shot didn't kill him, he would die by poisoning."
Sitting in the hut on bin Laden's mountain in Afghanistan, I asked bin Laden if he had tried to kill Clinton.

"As I said, every action elicits a similar reaction," he explained.

"What does Clinton expect from those that he killed, assaulting their children and mothers?"
But he was quick to sidestep the question of his culpability, very careful not to implicate himself.
He wasn't in Somalia, but he liked what he saw.
He didn't blow up American bases in Saudi Arabia, but those who did are martyrs.
He didn't pay for the World Trade Center bombing or the plot to kill Clinton, but they were good ideas.

For the future, bin Laden told me his first priority is to get the American military out of Saudi Arabia, the holiest of lands in Islam.
"Every day the Americans delay their departure, they will receive a new corpse."
Already, U. S. forces have been dealt devastating blows there.
Nineteen servicemen were killed in the 1996 bombing of the airforce barracks in Dhahran, and five U. S. military personnel were killed in a similar bombing in Riyadh in 1995.

Investigators believe bin Laden is tied at some level to both attacks.
Bin Laden said that the American military would leave Saudi Arabia, regardless of the fact that the Saudi royal family welcomes the American presence.
"It does not make a difference if the government wants you to stay or leave. You will leave when the youth send you in wooden boxes and coffins. And you will carry in them the bodies of American troops and civilians. This is when you will leave."

Civilians?

"We do not differentiate between those dressed in military uniforms and civilians; they are all targets in this fatwa."
Bin Laden argued that American outrage at attacks on American civilians constitutes a great double standard.
"American history does not distinguish between civilians and military, not even women and children.
They are the ones who used bombs against Nagasaki.
Can these bombs distinguish between infants and military? America does not have a religion that will prevent it from destroying all people."
Bin Laden believes that what we consider to be terrorism is just the amount of violence required to get the attention of the American people.

His aim is to get Americans to consider whether continued support of Israel is worth the bloodshed he promises.

"So we tell the Americans as people," bin Laden said softly,
"and we tell the mothers of soldiers and American mothers in general that if they value their lives and the lives of their children, to find a nationalistic government that will look after their interests and not the interests of the Jews.
The continuation of tyranny will bring the fight to America, as Ramzi Yousef and others did.
This is my message to the American people: to look for a serious government that looks out for their interests and does not attack others, their lands, or their honor.

And my word to American journalists is not to ask why we did that but ask what their government has done that forced us to defend ourselves."

His last words to the camera were, "It is our duty to lead people to the light."
Ali had been told to sit in the back of the room during the interview.
When it was over, I went looking for him.
"So, do we have a story?" I whispered when I found him.
"Please tell me it wasn't just an hour of 'Praise Allah' bullshit."

"No," Ali said.
"We have a very good story."
I asked Ali what bin Laden had said that would make this news.
"He was looking right into your face," Ali said, "and he was saying that you--you people, the Americans--would be going home from the Middle East in coffins and in boxes."
"He said that?" I asked, excited.
"And while he was saying this, what was I doing?"
Ali looked at me a bit oddly and said, "You were nodding like you agreed with his plan."
During the hour-long interview, bin Laden, assuming correctly that I did not understand a word he was saying, had taken to looking at his translator as he gave his answers.
Clearly, he did not understand the basic conventions of the American television interview.
Imagine that.
So, to keep his responses directed toward our camera, to make it seem like we were rocking along together, I engaged him in knowing eye contact and nodded thoughtfully.

"So, Ali, you're telling me he's promising genocide, and I'm nodding like an asshole?"

"Yes," Ali said, smiling.

But we had our little story, and a few weeks later, in a few minutes of footage, Osama bin Laden would say hi to America.
Not many people would pay attention.

Just another Arab terrorist.

Bin Laden was once again surrounded by his men, leaving the way he came in.
It was past two in the morning as the gunfire started again. This time, Rick shot the whole scene.
But as we packed our gear, bin Laden's press aide and his security chief came over to inspect our tape.
Looking carefully at each scene of bin Laden arriving and leaving, they ordered any face not covered with a kaffiyeh to be erased.
When I objected, they said the deal was simple: If we did not delete the faces, we would not leave with the tape.
And so, into the night, they played and rewound, played and rewound.
Over each face, the two would confer.
"He travels," one would say to the other, and we'd have to delete that second or two of footage.

According to the FBI, last summer, a group of these men "traveled" for bin

Laden to Kenya and Tanzania.
On August 7, two truck bombs destroyed the American embassies in both countries.
Two hundred thirteen dead in Kenya.
Twelve of them were Americans. In Tanzania, none of the eleven killed were Americans.
Most were Africans.
Many of them were Muslims.

Two weeks after the bombings, President Clinton ordered a missile attack on the very site where we had met bin Laden.
All three of his camps were obliterated, and there were casualties.
In anticipation of this American retaliation, bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, Atef, and most of the leadership had gone into seclusion.
Akhtar, who had vanished at the Afghan border on our trek in, was among those cheering, 9mm in his shoulder holster, as bin Laden came and went.
Akhtar travels, too.
He very obligingly escorted us out of Afghanistan and drove us all the way back to Islamabad.
Meanwhile, bin Laden's reach has now been documented among Albanians fighting the Serbs in Kosovo.
Wherever Muslims are in trouble, it seems, Osama bin Laden will be there, slaying enemies, real or perceived.
A modern nightmare, really--a big-screen villain, a freelancer with the resources of a state but without all the nasty obligations.
Sort of a Ford Foundation for terrorists--or freedom fighters, depending on whom you ask.
After the American cruise-missile attacks, intelligence sources told me that bin Laden had been intercepted talking on satellite phones, trying desperately to get damage assessments and news of casualties.
The same sources said that bin Laden had shifted his operations from Khost to Kandahar and that he was building new camps.
To try to arrange another meeting, Chris Isham and I asked Ali to return to London.

A few days later, the same people we had been dealing with in London were arrested by Scotland Yard's Anti-Terrorist Branch on "suspected connections to bin Laden's terrorist group."
One was being held for possible extradition to the United States.
We sent one more request to bin Laden, this time through our man in Peshawar, along with a list of questions.
We haven't heard back.
Bin Laden's old house, a walled mansion with a tower, has become a

guesthouse for his men. These men, new volunteers, seem to be showing up in greater numbers since the bombing.
Some will fight in Kashmir, others will fight on the front lines against the Taliban's opposition, and some, of course, will "travel" for bin Laden. After dark, around Kandahar, motorcades of twenty cars with tinted windows speed through the city.
No one there has to wonder who it is.
Osama bin Laden races through the darkness, taillights vanishing in a cloud of dust, a most wanted man.
The day after the American counterstrike, an ABC News colleague in Pakistan got a call from Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had been at the camp with us that night. Al-Zawahiri said bin Laden was alive and very well and that he had a message for us:

"The war has just started. The Americans should wait for the answer."